

Sermon  
[Matthew 2:1-12]

Pastor Dan Peterson  
*The Mystery of Four Wise Guys*

Grace to you, and peace, from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, who is that life in the world, Amen.

Ballard can be a dangerous place. Several years ago, I was I was completing a Bible study at Ballard First Lutheran Church. When I went out to my car afterward, I sat in the driver's seat, and I did what all Millennials or Gen Z would do; I got my phone out and started texting. Suddenly, a rock, or rather a concrete slab, smashed into my window, almost shattering it. Immediately, of course, I got out of the car to see what happened. In the front of my car, yelling incoherently, was a man who looked like Grizzly Adams, dressed in a sport coat, cursing me, for whatever reason.

And so, not really wanting to get into a conflict, I backed off, and I called 911, and then I watched as Grizzly Adams in a sport coat walked down 65th Street at such a slow pace that I was *sure* the Seattle Police could capture him.

I was not in danger, and so then I waited. I waited one hour. Then I waited two hours. Finally, I did what anyone else would do in that situation: I went to Facebook and posted my frustration!

At first, the responses were typical, "I'm so sorry to hear what happened to you." "Are you safe?"

But then they got a little snarky. One person, for example, said, "At least it's not raining," which is that kind of Seattle optimism that sometimes isn't exactly appropriate. At least it's not raining... There were a few more comments.

But then at the end, a friend of mine and a fellow pastor in California asked this question, "Do you *know* the guy?" [*laughter*]

Did I know the guy? "Yeah, sure," I wanted to say, "he belongs to the altar guild. He's really upset about the fact that I switched the Second Sunday of Christmas to the First Sunday of Epiphany."

Do I know the guy? Of course, in that context, I didn't say anything. The police finally responded, my window was fixed, and everything was okay.

But to this day, that question still lingers in my mind. "Do you know the guy?"

That's also a question I have regarding Matthew 2, our Gospel reading for today. Only, it's not *one* guy I'm curious about. It's *three* guys, three wise guys. Who were they? I want to know. Why did Matthew include them in this story? And, why does it matter? What, if anything, does their identity have when it comes to their significance for you and for me?

Now, as far as I can tell, based on tradition and scripture, these three wise guys could have had up to *five* different identities. You've probably heard most of them. "Three wise men" – that's how our translation renders it, and that's how most English translations render it. You may have also heard of "three kings." Some translations say, "three astrologers," and of course, we know from the story that they were "Gentiles." But did you also know that some speculate they could have been Persian priests, or even sorcerers? Sorcerers! Makes the story more interesting, doesn't it?

Fortunately, Matthew's use of the Greek word *magi* gives us clues as to their actual identity. As one commentator puts it, "The Magi, often referred to as wise men or astrologers, were likely – and I love this – scholars." They were scholars on their way to Seattle U... Wait, they were, scholars on their way from Persia or Babylon, to Judea.

Why do we think they were scholars? Because, as you heard in the text, they were familiar with Jewish prophecy, *and* they could read the skies. Scholars.

A second commentator points out that not only were they literate, but they were probably political officials from East Judea, or what we call Asia Minor, which is on the westernmost part of Asia, it's a little peninsula, and so, east of that. Foreign regimes often sent emissaries to greet and give gifts to new kings and rulers.

So why then do people say that they themselves were kings, or that they were sorcerers, or that they were astrologers? (Can you imagine that on your resume? Well, I do sorcery, I do astrology, and I'm a king...)

Kings. Let's talk about that one. First, in 1857 John Hopkins Jr. wrote, "We Three Kings of Orient Are." You've heard that song. Probably sang it many times. "We Three Kings of Orient Are," which, according to [hymnery.com](http://hymnery.com) – and I haven't consulted Kyle, with respect to the credibility of this site, I'm on my own here – contains two inaccuracies. "We Three Kings." First, the Bible says that they were Magi, not kings. Second, and this really strikes me, the Bible *never says how many of them there were*. We assume they are three. For what reason? Three gifts! But there's nothing in the text to indicate their actual number.

There is, however, a reason why Hopkins would have used this language in his hymn from the 19th century. Old Testament prophets describe the Messiah as being “worshiped by kings.” So, he’s drawing on that tradition. Even if it’s not in the text of Matthew, at least we know where it comes from.

Now, what about “sorcerers”? Can you guess what English word comes close, or comes from, rather, *magi*? Just add one letter: magic! Magicians! We see this in Acts 13. Luke uses *magus*, which is the singular for a wise man, to refer to “Elimas, the sorcerer.”

Fortunately, I think, for the Christian tradition, we have no evidence in the text, however, according to Matthew, that these men visiting Jesus were magicians or sorcerers; the term is not used in a derogatory way, and the very fact that they have a dream says nothing about their capacity for magic. It’s something that’s common in the Biblical world.

That leaves us with one more: “Astrologers.” We have evidence to support this identity in the text. These men clearly watched and studied the stars, which implies that they were learned, wise, or even scholars. They charted the stars, according to verse seven. They knew the exact time when the star in question appeared.

So who were they? We can infer again, learned men who could chart the sky. And because they brought gold, frankincense and myrrh, they were probably also political emissaries, because they had means to have gifts for Jesus that would have been unavailable to the broader population.

So, we have “learned men who could chart the sky who were probably political emissaries.” There’s a nice bow for Wise Guys.

The most important identity for them, however, according to a third commentator, is this: the Magi are *Gentiles*, guided by a star, a revelation in nature to those who do not have the scriptures. Matthew is constantly attending to the mission to the Gentiles from Israel. And so this is no exception. The star is a revelation in nature to those who do not have scripture, those who recognize the truth regarding Jesus and how through him, God saves the *world*, not just the Jews, but Jews and Gentiles alike.

Now this reference to a star as “revelation in nature” is probably hard to appreciate in the cold, damp, rainy, capital of the Pacific Northwest, Seattle, but it does show that Nature, too, participates in the story of redemption. Sure, Nature has its tragic side. It

is “red in tooth and claw”, as the poet Tennyson puts it; it’s “an eternally regurgitating monster,” as the poet Goethe puts it; “It groans in bondage to decay,” as the Apostle Paul puts it, but it also *sparkles*, which is why we sing, in the last stanza of “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” the whole creation echoes the joy that Christ has come. All creation sings, following the final song; and this is evident, in the participation of Nature in the story and its talk about the star.

“Do you know the guy?” No, I don’t know who he was. His identity remains a mystery. But I do know something about the wise men, the learned scholars, the political emissaries, who were Gentiles, and their god – that is, the God who is the Savior of *all* people, Jew or Gentile. And the best part of it all is that you can read all about it in Scripture, or – maybe in ten months – just look up, and see the stars.

Amen.